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COUNTING-OUT RHYMES OF CHILDREN

By WILL SEYMOUR MONROE

In the belief that the reactions of children on their play interests would be of service to the student of the psychology of childhood, I instituted five years ago the following investigation among the pupils in the elementary schools of western Massachusetts.

Two sets of compositions were written by two thousand and fifty (2,050) children, the direct aim of the investigation being six-fold :

1. To make as complete as possible a list of the traditional games of Massachusetts school children.
2. To determine the play interest of children as indicated by their preference for certain games.
3. To obtain descriptions of traditional games.
4. To ascertain personal variations in such typical games as tag and hide-and-seek.
5. To ascertain the qualities involved in determining leadership in plays and games.
6. To determine the extent and importance attached to counting-out rhymes in the plays and games of school children.

I now desire to present a brief review of the results obtained on the sixth and last rubric of the investigation. The compositions were written in the schools as a part of the required school work and the papers sent to me. The results were collated, tabulated, and curved by sexes and ages. The ages of the children were from 7 to 16 years, 978 of the whole number being boys and 1,072 girls. Of the more than two thousand children tested but five boys reported that they never used counting-out rhymes in their games. One of these was further questioned by his teacher as to the method employed in determining who shall be "it," and he replied : "I say to the boys, let's play. I'll be 'it' to begin the game."

The incident is introduced not because of surprise that these lads knew no counting-out rhymes, or at any rate made no use of

such rhymes, but because the investigation suggests that such rhymes are apparently universal features of the plays and games of children. Indeed, individual children reported as many as seventeen (17) such formulas.

In all, one hundred and eighty-three (183) different counting-out rhymes were reported, but all but fifty-four (54) proved to be variations of a few pleasing or much used jingles. The girls throughout mentioned more such rhymes than the boys. The one oftenest named, being given by 91 percent of the children, is the unmeaning and inelegant :

*Ena, mena, mina, mo,
Catch a nigger by the toe ;
If he hollers, let him go,
Ena, mena, mina, mo.*

The second in point of popularity, being given by 86 percent of the children, is :

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven,
All good children go to heaven.*

And the third oftenest named (given by 79 percent of the children) is :

*Richman, poorman, beggarman, thief,
Lawyer, doctor, merchant, chief.*

Sex differences were pronounced in the study. Rhymes involving color and dress were mentioned much oftener by the girls than by the boys, such as :

*Red, white and blue,
All out but you.*

And

*As I went up the steeple,
I met a crowd of people ;
Some were white and some were black,
And some were the color of a ginger-snap.*

The same is true of counting-out rhymes which involve love, courtship, and marriage, such as :

He loves me, he loves me not,

being mentioned almost exclusively by girls.

Boys, on the other hand, are far ahead of the girls in counting-out rhymes which involve number combinations, such as :

*Little boy driving cattle,
Don't you hear his money rattle,
One, two, three, out goes he.*

and

*Intry, mintry, coutry corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn ;
Wire, briar, limber, lock,
Three geese in a flock ;
One flew east, one flew west,
One flew o'er the cuckoo's nest,
One, two, three, out goes he.*

Boys also lead in rhymes involving animals and natural phenomena, such as :

*As I was walking near Silver lake,
I met a little rattlesnake ;
He ate so much of jelly cake,
It made his little belly ache.*

Nursery rhymes and jingles are made to do service in the plays and games of children, as is apparent from the frequent mention of such counting-out rhymes as :

*Hickory, hickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock,
The clock struck one and down he ran
Hickory, hickory, dock.*

Also :

*Peter, Peter, pumpkin eat her,
Had a wife and couldn't keep her.
Put her in a pumpkin shell,
And there he kept her very well.*

Many of the older children were questioned as to whether they ever composed, or had known of their companions composing counting-out rhymes for their plays and games, but none such could be recalled. From the large number of variations, however, it is apparent that children must add to and alter such rhymes. Following are examples of such variations :

*As I went up the apple tree,
All the apples fell on me ;
Bake a pudding, bake a pie,
Did you ever tell a lie ?
No, but I stole my mother's tea-pot lid.
She kicked me up, she kicked me down,
She kicked me all around the town.*

Compare with the following :

*As I went up the apple tree,
All the apples fell on me ;
Bake a pudding, bake a pie,
Did you ever tell a lie ?
No, I never told a lie,
But I ate the apple pie.*

These unmeaning and mysterious formulas, according to the testimony of the children themselves, serve a two-fold purpose in the play-activities of childhood :

1. They determine who shall take the undesirable part in a game—a species of casting lots, as has been suggested, but differing in the method of execution. As these Massachusetts children say, the counting-out rhymes enable them to determine who shall be “it”—the use of “it” being purely technical and having distinct meaning in their play-vocabularies,—and

2. They use these rhymes for purposes of divination ; some of them foretell the life-duration of the child ; others the occupation of prospective husbands, probable number of children, etc. Bolton is doubtless right in regarding counting-out rhymes as survivals of the practice of sorcery—spoken charms originally used to enforce

priestly power — and now repeated by children in innocent ignorance of the practices and language of a sorcerer in some dark age of the past.

Although occasionally undergoing changes, being transmitted from one generation of childhood to another through oral repetition, the marvel is that they should survive at all with such apparent purity. This persistence is possible only through a conservatism of children which is as pronounced as it is unexpected, since in most of the matters that concern them, they are reformers of the most aggressive type — wholly oblivious of the traditions and limitations of their environment.

But in all that pertains to their play interests, they are conservative to the core. The formulas of play are clung to with gospel tenacity ; and children themselves are most displeased when the canons of games have been violated.

Because of this insistence, this vein of juvenile conservatism, children's play interests and activities, with their counting-out rhymes, are the oldest things in the world, linking the child through his play-life to the mental life of savages and barbarians.